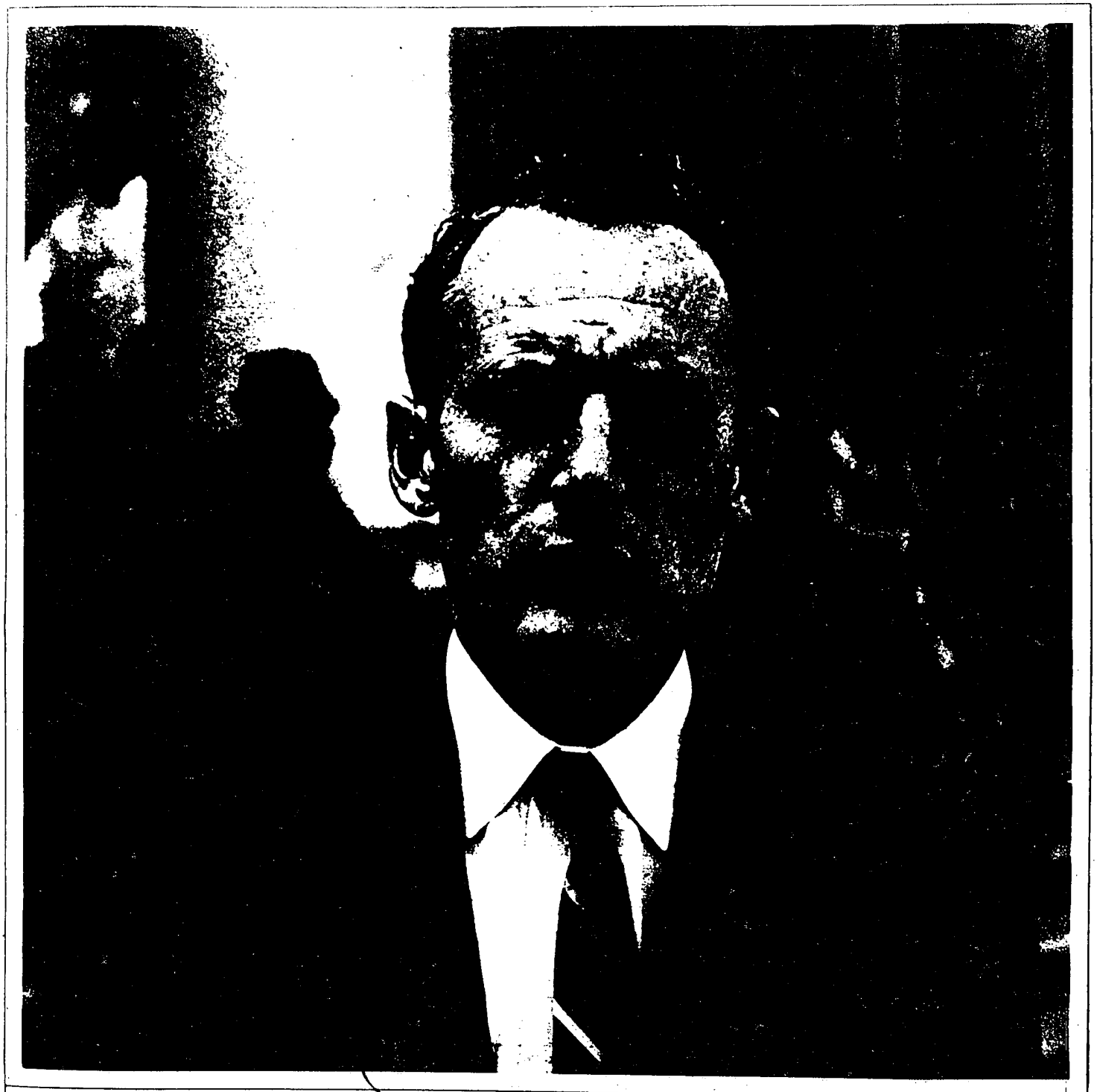
STAT

The Washington Post

Potomac

Sunday, May 18, 1969



The Colonel With Revolution on His Mind

Potomac

on the cover: Douglas Chevalier's photograph takes us to Howard University campus for a visit with Col. William R. Corson. Shelby Coffey III recounts this cold war warrior's adventures in the story on page 13.

From the Editor:

William R. Corson is a 43-year-old tough guy and former CIA operative whose dedication to free enterprise amazed and slightly appalled author Mary McCarthy when she visited his pacification unit in Vietnam. He is a retired Marine officer whose writings upset the Corps; a Howard University economics lecturer (white) on the verge of being fired. He is much a man of action and just as much a man of words; the words of Corson on Corson are reported today by **Shelby Coffey III.**

Author-painter **Michael O'Connell** questions today the tyranny of the car in the suburb over a man who really likes to walk. **Toby Thompson** finds overtones of the best of Germany in a Cabin John country-music beer joint.

Next week, **Philip D. Carter** introduces the hill people of our suburbs: Appalachia in Washington.

—JOE ANDERSON

Lt. Col. Corson on Lt. Col. Corson

Marine With Revolution on His Mind

By Shelby Coffey III

Lt. Col. William R. Corson is a retired Marine who looked back in anger, wrote a book on Vietnam in 1968 called *The Betrayal* and thereby pitched the Pentagon into a flurry of threats and promises. He's more. He's also a child of the tough side of Chicago who entered college at 15. He has led Marines in combat in three wars, is getting a Ph.D. in economics, and was one of that special, romantic breed of tough idealists who quietly fought the Cold War in Asia. He is one of America's leading experts on revolution. He still consults for the Pentagon on "matters of national security" but refuses to take a fee. Glittering names sprinkle his conversation like fragments in a meteor shower . . . "And then I told Jack Kennedy in the White House" . . . "Fermi told me I'd never be a physicist because I was too pragmatic" . . . (on the phone) "Tell Gen. (Maxwell) Taylor to shove it . . ."

A friend calls him "one of the hardest sons of bitches ever to come down the pike" and Corson quotes him approvingly.

If it weren't for the bitterness and the "many prices I paid" the whole tale of William Corson would read like a chapter out of some Captain America fantasy, complete with cape and M-16, with intellectual brilliance and barracks curses.

When Bill Corson, 43 and filled with irony and anger and even hope, reviews what has gone before, these are among the things he enumerates as having been part of it:

- He carried the fuse of the first hydrogen bomb in the trunk of his car from Port Chicago to Oakland, California in 1953.
- He was in charge of Marines assigned to guard American negotiators at Panmunjon, in case the enemy tried to overrun the negotiations.
- He played golf on a monthly basis with one of the top communist espionage agents in the Far East.
- He was one of the first Americans to tour Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the atomic bombs fell and this "had a great effect" upon him.

Continued on next page

PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRANK HOY

Corson Continued

• He led the Marine "Combined Action" pacification program in Vietnam which produced what his admirers claim to be our only victory in that war. The 78 hamlets that Corson's troops worked with held fast during the major Tet offensive in 1968. As far as anyone can tell.

At the moment, Bill Corson lives in comparative quiet in Chevy Chase, Md. with his second wife and two sons. Dark crescents of fatigue usually underline his gray eyes. He smokes heavily, dresses in somber suits, refers to Robert E. Lee as his military hero and thinks Jesus Christ was a perfect man, "even though I'm not a Christian."

He is getting his Ph.D. in Chinese money policies (from American University) and has been lecturing at Howard in economics. But there again controversy has tinged his position as it has much of his life.

His voice has the texture of pouring sand, an officer's voice at a briefing of apple-cheeked second lieutenants.

And sometimes, just to make sure you remember who you're talking to, the voice will slide into something like "I could kill you in eight seconds . . . But I don't have the instinct for that sort of thing anymore."

". . . the colonel, though sometimes scary and what he might call Machiavellian, is not a Spook."

Mary McCarthy in her book *Vietnam* after visiting Corson.

Sorry about that, Mary. But Bill Corson was Spookier than Halloween. A "Spook", in common parlance, is a CIA agent. Not long after the Korean conflict, Corson took a "quick course in Chinese" and began to fulfill special assignments for "the Company." Six, nine, twelve-month assignments in "Asia—that's all anybody needs to know—as far west as Pakistan."

Now and again, lecturing to classes and different groups, he will use examples from those days, like the Nationalist Chinese team of commandoes which was questioned so thoroughly by personnel bureaucrats just before their mission that, shaken into Hamlet-like self-doubts, they were all captured behind the Bamboo Curtain within 24 hours.

And Corson will illustrate how selective terrorism can quash a revolution by remembering the actions of Ngo Dinh Diem's secret police in the Vietnam of the late 50s. He remembers how the police would come into a village, line up every 20th man against a wall and—seemingly with no malice or reason—shoot them to death. The enemy National Liberation Front, Corson says, could make little headway with the thoroughly cowed population.

There are hints of more personal violence, mentions of men who had their hands chopped off in order to seize briefcases locked onto their wrists. Corson alludes, evades, remembers. You conjure images: . . . "I told Jack Kennedy" . . . the Chambers of Might in the Pentagon . . . quiet brutal reports to graying policymakers in the CIA . . . the striking of Satanic bargains in the Orient . . . the sheer endless labor of the new languages, the unreliable contacts . . . Corson lets the images grow one minute. He knocks them down the next.

"We were whores," says Corson, staring gloomily into a glass of cheap bourbon and water at home, "cleaning up the garbage of America's mistakes."

The brutal imagery of the ambivalent lover. The almost flirtatious hints of what *really* went on.

One acquaintance who has known a number of the military men who carried out "special assignments" for the CIA sees them as a *type*. The greatest public success achieved by any member of the group was Air Force Maj. Gen. Ed Lansdale's discovery in 1952 of Ramon Magsaysay in the Philippines. (Magsaysay was President of the Philippines when the Communist revolt there was crushed.)

A lot of the military-Agency men in Asia through the 50s tried to duplicate that success, tinkering with revolution and counterrevolution in different countries. The acquaintance feels that this type had the almost cliched qualities of idealism, romanticism and cynicism in common.

Continued on page 16

Corson Continued

"As much as they might like to curse everything and threaten to quit or threaten to write a book, they'd be back up in the hills in a month if they thought it would accomplish anything."

But beyond this deadly business that baffles and intrigues, serious personal consequences could result. For example, when Corson was off on the half-year and year-long tours in Asia, his family didn't know where he was, didn't know if he was dead or alive. Corson was divorced from his first wife in 1964, and he counts the marriage as "a casualty of the Cold War . . . that was just one of the prices many people playing games with the Communists in Asia paid. One of the prices for keeping this country afloat."

Looking surprisingly like a scaled-down George C. Scott with his broken nose, thin lips, and high forehead topped by graying curly hair, Bill Corson is explaining the intricacies of being a slumlord to his ecomics class at Howard. The class sits in rapt attention while he shows how two men can keep selling a $100,000 house back and forth to each other and clear over $60,000 every two years. Corson is not an orthodox teacher. Metaphors sprinkle his discussion of abstracts; he constantly tries to relate theory to "the real world."

He is not professionally popular with the economics teachers at Howard, and they recommended that his one-year contract as a lecturer not be renewed. But after the class several students stick around to talk about the economics of the ghetto.

"I'm a slum kid myself," says Corson. "I can understand what they're talking about."

But Bill Corson was a very special slum kid who had a powerful angel. His parents were divorced when he was 2; he spent some of his childhood with his grandparents in Chicago and had a newsstand at the age of 10. When he was 14, he took off for a year of banging around the country, a year of picking fruit and learning how to gamble. As a migrant worker, he met a number of blacks and considers it possibly "the most revealing period" of his life. Finally, Corson relates that he was carved

Continued on page 18

Corson Continued

up in a knifefight in which a good friend, dying in Corson's arms, told him to go back home and fight things out.

Corson went to work for the *Chicago* Daily News, where publisher Frank Knox, later Secretary of the Navy, started a reclamation program on the bustling young man. At Knox's urging, he took an examination and became a scholarship student in math and physics at the University of Chicago, where Knox was on the Board of Trustees.

When World War II broke out Corson joined the Marines as a reaction against his Phi Gamma Delta fraternity brothers, who were all taking the "clean sheet route," joining the Navy, traditional wartime haven for the upper crust.

He served as an enlisted man in the Pacific campaigns in Guam and Bougainville, became a Gunnery Sergeant, and was part of a commando team designated to pick up Japanese atomic scientists—until it was found out that the Japanese were still laboring in the Dark Ages of nuclear development.

After the war Corson went back to the University of Chicago and concentrated on economics for a year, after Dr. Enrico Fermi helped him decide physics was not his field. Suffering from malaria, picked up in the Pacific, he went to the University of Miami to teach and study economics and became embroiled in another controversy as a result of the "Joe McCarthy influence" that was frightening academics during those years.

Corson says he never meant to be a crusader but was somehow the leader of a group that refused to be intimidated by such overreactions as a Florida State Legislature ban on discussing segregation in the classroom.

After writer Mary McCarthy (who later went to Hanoi at the invitation of the North Vietnamese) visited him in the hills above Danang in 1967 to see what his pacification program was up to, she quoted him as telling her that he had thrown a newspaperman down the stairs in Chicago for "calling me a Communist and a Fascist in the same breath." Actually, he says, that happened in Florida and helped lead to Corson's rejoining the Marine Corps in 1950. Corson says Miss McCarthy may have gotten her facts wrong because during the course of their conversation he asked her to stay the night with him. She refused and he accused her of lacking the proper romantic spirit. "She would have enjoyed it," laughs Corson today, "but she trotted back to safety in Saigon."

Not long after, an incident occurred that gave Corson "the reason to get up at 5 a.m. every morning" to write his own book on the war. A young Marine in the pacification program—"a fine monument of a

Continued on page 20

Corson Continued

man"—was mortally wounded, and Corson was with him as he waited for the evacuation helicopter.

"He said to me, 'Colonel, doesn't anybody care?' I told him they did. He asked me why someone didn't tell them the truth about the war. I said I would. And he grabbed me by the arm and said 'Colonel, do it!' Then he died, right there in my arms."

Upon return from Vietnam, Corson had planned to retire but was asked to serve in the Pentagon because of his Asian experience. When he finished *The Betrayal*, he filed it with the Department of the Navy, which passed it along. Then what he calls "the treatment" started.

"People would tell me I was a shoo-in for General, there was a medal in the mill, I was slated to go to the War College . . . then they started to get nasty and some apple-cheeked lieutenant would start to make threats . . . Then they threw the Big Knife and tried to hold up my retirement."

The "crunch was on," and Corson's new wife and children were worried. But not Bill Corson. He slept well. "When you've been The Enforcer, you know how the game is played. Generals forget the rules. They think they can do anything."

He broke the story to *The Washington Post*. As embarrassing national stories bedeviled the Pentagon, the Pentagon retreated. In July of 1968 he became a private citizen. Five days later his book was published, to generally high praise. In a concise style, sometimes Menckenesque in its rage, he blasted the Vietnamese government, American involvement and Army strategy. Some of the conclusions about subjects of which he did not have first-hand knowledge are reputed to be dubious, points to quibble over. But the book made something of a splash. As one Marine still in the Pentagon puts it, "He ought to thank the Corps for helping publicize the damn thing."

Corson, for his part, says that certain

Continued on page 22

Corson Continued

figures in the Johnson Administration were the ones who really didn't want to see it published, men whose careers depended on the Vietnam war going well. He claims that the book was brought up in one of the "ad hoc Security Council"meetings and was finally dismissed as not being too harmful since, as one of the members reputedly put it: "Nobody reads books anymore."

Growing heated over what is happening in the Pentagon, over vested interests at large and the men who can think of nothing except to "cover their asses," Corson calls the building "a bucket of vomit."

Gesturing to huge rows of white paperback books in his den, Corson says, "There are all the Chinese books on revolution. In Chinese. I've read them . . ."

The subject of revolution is still one of Corson's major concerns. The jargon of revolution and mathematics sometimes clutters his conversation. He thinks America may be in the embryonic stages of a revolution and is in fact working on a new book about students and blacks and how they fit into the social elements necessary for revolution.

Late in April his own black students were hinting that some of the militants on the campus might make an issue of his unrenewed contract, though it would take a back seat to the issue of who would be named president of the University. Corson advised his students against such action and told them to take it as a good lesson in how "the Establishment reacts" to the unconventional.

He called his enemies at Howard "Uncle Toms who feel threatened" by his vitality and unorthodoxy.

Bill Corson looks back for a model to Robert E. Lee, who also was a teacher after completing his military service. "Lee was the only truly great general in American history . . . and take a look sometime at how he handled racial discrimination and student riots at his college (Washington and Lee in Lexington, Va.).

"Lee had this compassion for humanity that most generals lack . . . the butchers always wind up being the heroes."

Perhaps it is this sense of humanity and curiosity about people that is part of the key to understanding this man. One journalist who knew him in Vietnam says he was generally regarded as one of the most popular commanders there and, "possibly more importantly, he really cared about the Vietnamese people, for all his ranting and raving at times."

And Corson loves to talk about how he has gambled in every country in the Orient in an effort to get a reading on people. His knowledge of "Elephant Chess" (similar to Western chess) helped his pacification program immensely, but he still prefers five-card stud.

And finally this sense of a man's actions —his limitations and his victories in the struggle for a destiny— is connected with his espionage work. "One of the reasons I got out," he says, "is because issues and 'interests' had overtaken men. One man couldn't make that much difference anymore."

At the moment he plans to study the cities more deeply and is applying for positions in various colleges. Both roles will call for his knowledge of revolution. He will continue to consult for the Pentagon. You get the feeling that if "the crunch was on" again for his country, really and truly and without too many bureaucrats nosing into his work, Bill Corson might go "back up in the hills again" where one man could make a difference.

In the meanwhile, though, "We have a fire going here at home with the unrest and the disadvantaged . . . And this is the country my sons are going to inherit. I've got to do something about America's problems now."

Shelby Coffey III is an assistant editor of Potomac.